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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 05 COLOMBO 000535

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STATE FOR SCA, SCA/INSB AND PRM
STATE ALSO PASS USAID
AID/W FOR ANE/SCA, DCHA/FFP (DWORKEN, KSHEIN)
AID/W FOR DCHA/OFDA (MORRISP, ACONVERY, RTHAYER, RKERR)
ATHENS FOR PCARTER
BANGKOK FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA (WBERGER)
KATHMANDU FOR USAID/DCHA/OFDA AND POL (SBERRY)
GENEVA FOR RMA (NKYLOH, NHILGERT, MPITOTTI)
USUN NEW YORK FOR ECOSOC (D MERCADO)
SECDEF FOR OSD - POLICY
PACOM ALSO FOR J-5

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/17/2019
TAGS: [PREF](#) [MOPS](#) [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [ASEC](#) [CE](#)
SUBJECT: NORTHERN SRI LANKA SITREP 74

REF: A) COLOMBO 533 B) COLOMBO 529 C) COLOMBO 522 D)
COLOMBO 519 E) COLOMBO 514 F) COLOMBO 507 G)
COLOMBO 501 H) COLOMBO 492 I) COLOMBO 484
J) COLOMBO 477 K) COLOMBO 470 AND PREVIOUS

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ROBERT BLAKE, JR. REASONS: 1.4 B AND D.

1. (C) SUMMARY: May 16-17 marked a watershed day in Sri Lanka's conflict with the LTTE, as an estimated 72,000 civilians escaped the safe zone. Remnants of the LTTE continued to mount resistance in an area of less than one square kilometer in the government's unilaterally declared "no fire zone." President Rajapaksa is expected to announce the end of fighting in Parliament on May 19. The Defense Secretary announced publicly on May 17 that there were no civilians remaining in the conflict zone. However, a Tamil member of Parliament and the Bishop of Mannar (protect) separately contacted Embassy to report that tens of thousands of civilians were still in the conflict area and at grave risk. Ambassador contacted senior GSL officials throughout the day, including Secretary of Defense Gothabaya Rajapaksa and Foreign Minister Bogollagama, to urge acceptance of a mediated surrender of the remaining Tigers and maximum restraint on the part of the military to avoid further civilian casualties, particularly after the reports from the Bishop of Mannar of continued high numbers of civilians in the safe zone. Rajapaksa refused to accept mediated surrender on the grounds that the fighting was all but over, but said troops had been instructed to accept anyone who wishes to surrender. Ambassador spoke to Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa to request access for the ICRC to evacuate dead and wounded. Rajapaksa refused, contending the

GSL could manage on its own. Four government of Sri Lanka doctors and an Additional Government Agent escaped from the conflict zone on May 16 and were taken into custody by the military. One doctor with serious wounds was airlifted to Colombo, two or three other doctors were held for interrogation at Omanthai, and the Additional Government Agent was taken to an IDP camp. UNSYG Chief of Staff Nambiar, now in Colombo, was promised access to live UAV footage of the safe zone. He also has requested to visit the safe zone and the camps in Vavuniya. He said the GSL has agreed to both in principle. See final paragraph for proposed USG statement to be released at the end of the armed conflict. End summary.

LTTE Pitches Surrender

¶2. (C) Norwegian Ambassador Hattrem called Ambassador late evening May 16 to report that he had received a phone call from Selvarasa Padmanathan ("KP") stating that the LTTE were prepared to surrender without conditions to a neutral third party. Ambassador called ICRC head of delegation Paul Castella, who said he had been in conversations with the GSL, and that ICRC staff were prepared to go into the conflict zone by military helicopter. Castella said that Defense Secretary Gothabaya Rajapaksa had agreed to the arrangement, but first wanted the names of the LTTE leaders who were prepared to surrender. Despite helpful efforts from Norway and SCA Acting DAS Owen, the LTTE has yet to provide such a list.

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¶3. (C) Ambassador spoke to Gothabaya Rajapaksa on the morning of May 17 to urge him to allow the ICRC into the conflict zone to mediate a surrender. Rajapaksa commented, "We're beyond that now," reporting that approximately 50,000 civilians had escaped from the conflict zone overnight and in the early morning hours, and very few remained. He said that the LTTE still held only a very small area, inland from the beach, in the conflict zone. He said the Army had issued instructions to field commanders to accept surrenderees. He said there were intelligence intercepts of communications between some LTTE leaders, but they had no knowledge of the whereabouts of Pottu Amman or Prabhakaran.

Status of Doctors

¶4. (C) A UN contact told DATT that the Additional Government Agent who came out of the conflict zone on May 15-16 had been transferred to an IDP camp in Vavuniya. One government doctor with serious injuries from shelling was airlifted by the Air Force to the hospital in Anuradhapura. The other two government doctors were still undergoing interrogation at the IDP reception point in Omanthai. (Note: these doctors have provided extensive information to the foreign media on Government shelling of the safe zone, leading to obvious concern now for their welfare.) Ambassador told the Defense Secretary that we had received reports that government doctors had come out of the conflict zone on May 16 and were now being held for interrogation at Omanthai. Ambassador said it was important to be sure that they were safe and being treated properly. Gothabaya assured Ambassador this was the case, and noted that "several others have called" on the matter.

Prabhakaran Status Unclear

¶5. (SBU) There are numerous reports that Prabhakaran and other LTTE leaders may have committed suicide on May 16 by blowing themselves up. Most of the reports appear to be sourced to the website of Toronto-based Tamil journalists D.B.S. Jeyaraj: "Speculation is rife among knowledgeable circles in Colombo that Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam

(LTTE) leader Velupillai Prabhakaran is no more among the living. It is widely believed that the 54 year old Tiger supremo who was born on November 26, 1954 has committed suicide along with more than 300 of his deputies and senior cadres in the Mullivaikal area of Karaithuraipattu GAG division in Mullaitheevu district." (Note: Embassy has no way to verify this independently. The rumor appears to be connected to several large explosions heard from inside the small LTTE-controlled area on the night of May 16-17. We cannot yet confirm wire service reports sourced to anonymous Army officers that Prabhakaran's body has been found.)

Information from Military Sources

¶6. (C) At 10 a.m. on May 17, an Army contact told DATT that fighting had resumed that morning, after a virtual freeze on operations overnight as the troops processed IDPs. The army

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said the LTTE was confined to an area four hundred meters by four hundred meters. There were "several hundred" civilians among them, possibly LTTE family members. According to the Army, 50,000 civilians had escaped over the last two days. The LTTE continued setting fires overnight, destroying vehicles, fuel and other logistics. The Army recovered 200 LTTE bodies on land, some killed in action, others suicides. The Army is recovering the LTTE bodies from six small craft that tried to break out in the early morning hours across the Nanthi Kadal lagoon to the jungles of Mullaitivu. None got away. Intercepts indicated that LTTE leader Laxman and one other leader may have been among them. The Army is trying to identify the recovered bodies. There were no intercepts of Sea Tiger leader Soosai or Tiger intelligence chief Pottu Amman since yesterday. The Army contact claimed that there were many Army casualties with burns, likely from LTTE white phosphorous munitions. He also claimed the Army is not using artillery, since the contested area is too small.

¶7. (C) An Air Force source confirmed that fighting was continuing. UAV coverage shows the LTTE confined to an area in the southwest corner of the conflict zone, north of the Nanthi Kadal lagoon's outlet to the sea. He said 10,000) 15,000 more civilians separated from the LTTE were still on the move. There were no signs of Prabhakaran, Pottu Amman or Soosai.

¶8. (C) According to the UN's head of security in Sri Lanka, some ICRC local staff came out of the conflict zone in the night from May 16-17. Of the two remaining local UN staff in the conflict zone, at least one had been forcibly recruited by the LTTE, and the other may also have joined. Their whereabouts and status were unknown.

Continued Reports of Civilians in Safe Zone

¶9. (C) PolOff received a call on May 17 from Tamil National Alliance Member of Parliament for Jaffna Gajendrakumar Ponnambalam. Ponnambalam said he had been in touch with "KP" late the previous evening, who told him that 3,000 had been killed and 25,000 wounded on May 16. Intense shelling was continuing. KP said the LTTE was now prepared to surrender. Ponnambalam said he had been in discussion with Senior Presidential Advisor Basil Rajapaksa about traveling to the conflict zone along with a bishop to arrange the surrender of the remaining LTTE forces. However, Basil was now refusing to confirm the trip pending the outcome of a meeting with President Rajapaksa who had just returned from the G-11 summit in Jordan. Ponnambalam estimated that there could still be as many as 100,000 civilian left in the conflict zone.

¶10. (C) Ambassador called Basil Rajapaksa to note the reports of many dead and wounded lying in the conflict zone, and again requested access for the ICRC to the area to evacuate

the wounded. Basil energetically refused, saying that the ICRC had failed on three consecutive days to evacuate wounded, even though the Additional Government Agent had said it was safe to do so. Rajapaksa noted that the Army was evacuating wounded civilians by air to Anuradhapura and could deal with the current situation by itself. He said the

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government urgently required shelter, food and water for approximately 50,000 new arrivals expected soon in the camps.

¶11. (C) Norwegian DCM told PolOff that a priest in Jaffna had called her to say that another priest in the conflict zone had called him on a satellite phone. He said he was with a group of 40 children, who were pinned down in bunkers in the conflict zone and dared not move because of intensive incoming shelling. She reported that the ICRC deputy head of delegation had told her that ICRC local staff in the conflict zone had informed them there were still many civilians remaining.

¶12. (C) The Bishop of Mannar called PolOff to inform us that there were seven Catholic priests still in the conflict zone, tending to about 80 parishioners. The priests estimated that there were 60,000 to 75,000 civilian left in the zone, according to the Bishop. The Bishop considered that the Defense Secretary's statement that there were no civilians left was "extremely dangerous," because soldiers would now assume that anyone still in bunkers was LTTE combatants. The priests had told him they were unable to escape because of intense firing near their location. Conditions varied greatly within the zone, they said, and they had been unable to move away along with others who had escaped. The Bishop pleaded for a two-day cessation of hostilities for evacuation of the dead and wounded and so that the remaining civilians could get out.

¶13. (SBU) USAID Office of Foreign Disaster Assistance representative and PRM deputy regional refugee officer plan to travel to Vavuniya May 18) 22 to visit the IDP camps and assess the adequacy of preparations for the new IDPs. OFDA recently provided \$1.7 million to UNICEF for nutrition, water, sanitation and hygiene and \$880,000 to IOM for health clinics and ambulances in IDP sites.

Nambiar Readout

¶14. (SBU) UN SYG Chief of Staff Vijay Nambiar told Ambassador the afternoon of May 17 that the government had reported that 72,000 IDPs have reached Omanthai in the last 24 hours. Defense Secretary Rajapaksa told him that fighting was still going on in the North but that all the civilians were believed to have exited the safe zone. The Secretary offered to provide Nambiar access to live UAV footage that the UN is now working to arrange through the Air Force. Nambiar also requested access both to the safe zone and the camps in Vavuniya. He said the GSL has agreed in principle to both but has not specified when this might occur.

¶15. (C) Ambassador reported to Nambiar that the Bishop of Mannar had indicated to the Embassy that thousands of civilians may still be in the safe zone. Ambassador briefed Nambiar that he had just spoken with Foreign Minister Bogollagama to relay this information and urge that the Government inform the Sri Lankan military of this so that they do not assume that everyone remaining in the safe zone is an LTTE cadre. Ambassador urged the Foreign Minister to tell the Defense Secretary that the forces should abide the President's commitment not to use heavy weapons and to do

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everything possible to protect those civilians who remain. Ambassador also urged the GSL to allow the ICRC to access the

safe zone, both to help evacuate the wounded and to reassure the international community that the GSL was taking care to protect civilians. Ambassador urged that Nambiar reinforce these messages on May 18 with GSL officials. Nambiar agreed to do so.

¶16. (SBU) Embassy recommends the Department issue a statement along the following lines after the announcement of the end of the armed conflict ends follows: (begin draft statement)

The United States welcomes the fact that the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam LTTE an organization that has terrorized the people of Sri Lanka for decades, no longer control any territory within Sri Lanka. This 26-year-old conflict has cost tens of thousands of Sinhalese and Tamil lives, uprooted countless Sri Lankans from their homes, and has brutally divided the nation. We especially recognize the tremendous loss of life and hardship endured by civilians in northern Sri Lanka during the past weeks and months.

To truly defeat terrorism, the Government of Sri Lanka must immediately begin to heal the wounds of the conflict and work toward building a democratic, prosperous, tolerant and united Sri Lanka. A lasting peace in Sri Lanka depends on Sinhalese, Tamils and all other Sri Lankans working together to achieve new power sharing arrangements that safeguard and promote the rights of all Sri Lankans.

The United States remains deeply concerned for the welfare of the hundreds of thousands of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) uprooted by the recent fighting. We call on the Government to open additional sites for IDPs to ease overcrowding in the existing facilities. We welcome and urge the Government of Sri Lanka to abide by its commitment to return the majority of IDPs to their homes by the end of this year. We also urge the Government to work hand in hand with the UN, ICRC, and non-government organizations to ensure all IDPs are accorded rights and care meeting the highest international standards.

(end draft statement)

BLAKE
MOORE